

Beating the Winter Blues

I'm often asked, around this time of year, about the "winter blues." I'm not talking about a jazz festival in Yokohama. I'm talking about depression, or more specifically, Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). If during the winter months, you have ever felt more down than usual, depressed nearly every day for most of the day, had difficulty with weight gain or loss, found yourself more fatigued, less productive, slowed down or agitated, sleeping too much or too little, lost interest in things that were pleasurable, full of inappropriate guilt or feelings of worthlessness, preoccupied with thoughts of death, and developed a poor attitude, than you may have been experiencing depression with a seasonal pattern.

The cause of depression can stem from genetics, a chemical imbalance, behavior, environment, and psychological outlook. Consequently, there are a variety of options that one might choose in an attempt to prevent, manage, and or eliminate depression. A key trigger for winter depression is a decrease in light. As the days appear shorter and nights longer, photosensitive chemical pathways in our brains are affected which may result in a change in our chemistry and therefore our mood. For individuals experiencing seasonal affective disorder, this change is more dramatic than in the general population.

As with all forms of depression, an approach that couples medication and psychotherapy has consistently shown the best results. Major depression and thought of suicide are very serious and should be clinically treated as soon as possible. Signs of suicide may include: feeling of hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness, coupled with traumatic situations (significant loss or change in a relationship from an argument, adultery, breakup, separation, divorce, or death; loss of status, job, support system, and or emotional safety; worry about job or school performance), depressive symptoms (emotionally empty, withdrawn, sad, lack of energy, weight change, irritability), verbal warnings ("I'm going to kill myself," "I'd be better off dead," "I just can't go on any longer,"), behavioral warnings (giving away possessions, an increase in alcohol or drug use, obsession with death, planning one's own death and or funeral, a sudden lift in one's emotions). If you, a friend, or loved one have a history of depression and or suicide seek help, support, and treatment.

Additional steps that one can take to assist their mood are the following: get out of your house or barracks room during the daylight hours, maintain a healthy routine, exercise, limit your alcohol intake, limit impulsive and excessive behaviors such as spending, eating, or gambling, interact with others, maintain good nutrition and a positive outlook, and most importantly limit your napping and attempt to consistently get approximately eight hours of sleep at night. During the winter months, many people over or under sleep, remain indoors, in the dark, inactive, alone, in front of their television, excessively eating and or drinking alcohol, making them more susceptible to feeling blue. Our community has a multitude of activities year round that fosters fellowship and fun (e.g. MWR trips, the fitness center, bowling, the library, college classes, the craft shop, the auto shop, going for walks, golfing, ballroom dancing, seeing Japan, making and or visiting friends and family, etc). So, if during the winter months, you find yourself or a friend sliding into a maladaptive pattern of behaviors listed in this article and you start feeling depressed, then get active or get help. For more information on any mental health related topics call 263-4610 or visit Behavioral Health Services at building 502.

David G. Brown, Psy.D., CSAC
Behavioral Health Services (BHS)
BG Crawford F. Sams, U.S. Army Health Clinic